Assessing the appropriateness of possible alcohol strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm among young adults in Hong Kong: a stakeholders interview study

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Alcohol as a Global Health Issue

- Alcohol as an issue often overlooked in public health despite the burden of its effects.
  - Third largest risk factor towards global mortality and morbidity
  - Responsible for 5.8% of all global deaths
  - Contributes to 139 million (5.1%) disability-adjusted life years (DALY) lost

(Source: WHO, 2014)
Local situation of heavy alcohol use

Note: Binge drinking – defined as 4+ standard drinks within a single occasion

9.8% in 2012

Source: Behavioural Risk Factor Survey (2010)
Challenges of reducing alcohol-related harm in HK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Type</th>
<th>Level of support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>Duty of tax eliminated for all beverages except spirits and liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Some licensing regulations for bars, restaurants and nightclubs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>No regulations on off-premise sales (convenience stores / supermarkets)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation of marketing</td>
<td>Television advertisements allowed beyond 4:00pm – 8:30pm</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No regulations for promotions, sponsorships, print and social media</td>
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<td>Drink-driving</td>
<td>Optimally enforced by law and law enforcement personnel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Random breath testing</td>
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<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Adequate treatment service from gov’t and NGOs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>No screening and brief intervention guides on primary care level</td>
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(Source: Casswell & Thamarangsi, 2009; WHO, 2011)
Research gaps

- Most evidence supporting effectiveness of best practices originate from European, North American, and Australian nations.
  - Heavily focused on college students vs. community
  - Inherent sociocultural differences
- Hong Kong: traditionally a low-consumption culture
  - Perceptions towards alcohol use and related prevention strategies may differ from rest of the world
- Support from wide array of stakeholders is crucial
Objectives

• To examine:
  • what alcohol-related key stakeholders perceive as appropriate and effective alcohol strategies for Hong Kong young adults;
  • what the impact of such actions would be on young adults and the development of their drinking practices.

– Funding source: JC School of Public Health and Primary Care Research Postgraduate Student Grant
Methods

• Method: One-on-one interviews (Three from each of all subgroups except one, 30-45 minutes, n = 16)
• Recruitment: Convenient and snowball sampling from each subgroup
• Sample: Representatives from the following categories:
  – Non-profit organizations catering to youth service,
  – Government representatives,
  – Food and beverage business owners/managers,
  – Education sectors (secondary school, vocational schools and universities),
  – Law enforcement,
  – Alcohol manufacturers (one representative only).
Methods

• Guiding topics:
  – Perceived youth drinking situation in Hong Kong
  – What they perceive to be effective in reducing alcohol-related harm
    • Feasibility
      – The possible impact of WHO-recommended best practices to their constituents, business, and themselves
      – Why would such actions be useful or not useful in their point of view

• Codes were generated directly from the questions listed above and additional themes from the data that were not included in the umbrella of topics.
  – Resulting in 6 unique themes
### Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordability:</th>
<th>Education:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for increase in alcohol tax</td>
<td>Need for mass media campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for increase in overall price</td>
<td>Direction of health education message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax effects on overall price</td>
<td>Public awareness of alcohol-related harms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived effects of tax on reducing harm</td>
<td>Perceived effects of tax on reducing harm</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Physical Availability:</th>
<th>Evidence:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existence of 24-hour off-premise sales</td>
<td>Lack of available data on alcohol-related harm</td>
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<tr>
<td>No regulations on off-premise underage sales</td>
<td>Need for knowledge transfer to stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricting hours for off-premise sales</td>
<td>Public health impact against economic interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restricting hours for on-premise sales</td>
<td>Evidence on effectiveness of legislative strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulations on upstairs bars</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Restricting alcohol outlet density</td>
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<tr>
<th>Marketing:</th>
<th>Partnership and Community Mobilization:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Impact of direct advertising on YA drinking</td>
<td>Need for coordinated task force</td>
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<td>Television and movie content as role models</td>
<td>Grassroot actions at the community level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drink specials</td>
<td>Public health impact against economic interests</td>
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Findings

• **Affordability through taxation:**
  
  – Mixed perceptions on effectiveness
    • Pro:
      – If done right, significant impact on young adults
      – Less disposable income and high unemployment rates
    • Con:
      – Current tax structure requires drastic overhaul for taxation to have any impact: “*if you look at the retail prices in Hong Kong…*the amount of tax that makes up to the final products is certainly significantly below 1%; by removing it, you don’t actually change anything*”
      – Young adults only participate in occasional drinking
  
  – Feasibility is very low:
    • Large public and private sector resistance
    • Legislation may not be supported by public or government given that tax was repealed only very recently

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Findings

- **Physical availability:**
  - Most effective means to reduce alcohol harms
  - Regulations for off-premise sales needed: “You can even just go to a supermarket or a local produce store and buy alcohol...if someone says that they’re buying it for their parents, they’ll sell it.”
    - Restrict hours of sales
    - Legislation on underage drinking
    - Product placement
  - On-premise sales
    - Shortening of existing service hours
    - Concerns about upstairs bars
  - Feasibility:
    - Extension of current licensing system to regulate off-premise sales
    - On-premise sales restrictions – seen as more difficult to enforce due to upstairs bars and illegal sales
Findings

**Marketing:**
- Point of sale marketing should be addressed
- Banning on event-based promotions and discount package needed: "There are no organizations or government controls that provide a ceiling for this kind of promotion."
- Feasibility:
  - Difficult to regulate
  - Direct advertising easily regulated, but not necessary
  - Co-regulatory system between government and alcohol manufacturers and retailers
Findings

- **Education:**
  - Unanimous agreement in its necessity
  - Young adults in HK not informed on potential physical harms of alcohol use: “They don’t have this sort of awareness...about how it can affect your central nervous system, instead of just purely regaining consciousness...after the alcohol has passed”
  - Scale up of public health education campaigns

- **Feasibility:**
  - Very high level of feasibility
  - First step towards other viable actions
Findings

- **Need for evidence:**
  - Not enough statistics to justify legislative actions
  - Needs clear data to show that alcohol-related harms among young adults should be addressed alongside tobacco and other drugs
  - Possible underreporting
  - Lack of data in law enforcement
  - Stakeholders – not well-versed in alcohol-related harms

- **Need for partnership:**
  - Legislation is not necessary to regulate alcohol availability and marketing
  - Grassroots advocacy and community mobilization
  - Involvement of all sectors in future decision-making processes
Discussion

• **Legislative actions against alcohol**
  – Regulations on affordability and advertising: not feasible in the current environment
    • Low public support
    • Lacking in evidence and knowledge transfer of international research
    • Long-term process
  – Actions against availability: most viable option
    • Extension of regulating power by existing licensing unit

• **Public health education**
  – Stakeholders generally underestimated young adults’ knowledge on alcohol-related harms
  – Need for specific messages tailored to young adults
    – Social harms vs. physical harms
    – Young adult involvement is key
Discussion

• **Lack of awareness among stakeholders**
  – Low compared to tobacco and other drugs
    • Not recognized as a harmful, addictive substance
  – Requires central point in coordination of advocacy efforts
  – Stakeholders suggest large government role in leading efforts
    • Requires involvement of all relevant stakeholders
    • Public health interests vs. commercial interests
  – Inform community on potential actions against harm
Conclusions

- Priority actions for the future on strategies to reduce and prevent alcohol-related harm among young adults in Hong Kong and Asian regions:
  - raising awareness of the physical and social impacts of alcohol on both young adults and the community;
  - regulating physical availability of alcohol on a policy level;
  - engaging the community to induce grassroot actions against outlet establishments, and to advocate for other recommended best practices, namely on affordability and marketing.
References

- Department of Health, HKSAR (2011). *Action Plan to Reduce Alcohol-related Harm in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Government Logistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China.
Thank you!

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